Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]?

Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing

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Abstract

'Gender', understood as the social construction of sex, is a key concept for feminists working at the interface of theory and policy. This article examines challenges to the concept which emerged from different groups at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, September 1995, an important arena for struggles over feminist public policies. The first half of the article explores contradictory uses of the concept in the field of gender and development. Viewpoints from some southern activist women at the NGO Forum of the Beijing Conference are presented. Some of them argued that the way 'gender' has been deployed in development institutions has led to a depoliticization of the term, where feminist policy ambitions are sacrificed to the imperative of ease of institutionalization. 'Gender' becomes a synonym for 'women', rather than a form of shorthand for gender difference and conflict and the project of transformation in gender relations. 'Gender sensitivity' can be interpreted by non-feminists as encouragement to use gender-disaggregated statistics for development planning, but without consideration of relational aspects of gender, of power and ideology, and of how patterns of subordination are reproduced. A completely different attack on 'gender' came from right-wing groups and was battled out over the text of the Platform for Action agreed at the official conference. Six months prior to the conference, conservative groups had tried to bracket for possible removal the term 'gender' in this document, out of opposition to the notion of socially constructed, and hence mutable, gender identity. Conservative views on gender as the 'deconstruction of woman' are discussed here. The article points out certain contradictions and inconsistencies in feminist thinking on gender which are raised by the conservative backlash attack on feminism and the term 'gender'.

Keywords

sex; gender; Beijing conference; instrumentalism; feminism; development studies

Introduction

For academics working in the gender and development (GAD) field, the concept of 'gender' is everyday currency. In the UK, at least, social relations

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of gender analysis, with its roots in socialist feminism, is a major foundation for GAD thinking (Young *et al.*, 1981; Razavi and Miller, 1995a: 27–32). Understanding the concept of 'gender' in the context of social relations analysis remains a touchstone of gender and development research, teaching and training in many institutions in the UK and elsewhere. However, outside of academia, within policy and activist arenas, the utility and relevance of 'gender' has been highly contested. Indeed, in some policy applications, 'gender' has come to lose its feminist political content. This article explores conflicting discourses on the relevance and meaning of gender in policy and activist contexts. We draw on debates over 'gender' aired at the NGO (non-government organization) Forum of the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, in September 1995.[1] This conference provided an extraordinary opportunity to investigate a vast range of contemporary policy and activist discourses, given the very broad spectrum of interest groups represented there.

The first section of this chapter is inspired by the challenge to GAD from grassroots development workers and women activists in the south. This challenge is linked to the current debate over the institutionalization of gender in development policy and practice, and relates to the perceived depoliticization of the concept of gender. The second part explores a completely different critique of 'gender' from conservative groups who attacked 'gender' during the Beijing process on the grounds that it is an over-radical and unrepresentative approach to thinking about social relations. We consider the ways in which the conservative critique illuminates contradictions and lacunae in feminist theorizing about gender. Underlying both sections are questions about what happens to feminist concepts in activist and policy arenas and about our own role in this process, as gender and development researchers.

The mainstreaming agenda

The Beijing Conference reflected the extent to which gender issues have entered the 'mainstream', at least at the level of rhetoric. The entire range of bilateral and multilateral development agencies vied to display their gender sensitivity with a range of policy documents and promotional literature as well as presence at workshops and on panels at both official and NGO events. For example, the World Bank launched its analytical framework *Toward Gender Equality: The Role of Public Policy*; while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) proferred the 1995 *Human Development Report* focusing on gender.

In the 1990s, 'mainstreaming' has become a dominant theme in gender and development policy circles. Mainstreaming evolved from the earlier call for

the 'integration' of women in development, dating back to the 1970s. It arose following the Nairobi UN Women's Conference in 1985, in part reflecting the perceived failure of national women's machineries, many set up in the 1970s and early 1980s, to achieve significant results or influence over government policy. Mainstreaming signifies a push towards systematic procedures and mechanisms within organizations – particularly government and public institutions – for explicitly taking account of gender issues at all stages of policy-making and programme design and implementation. It also represents a call for the diffusion of responsibility for gender issues beyond small and underfunded women's units to the range of sectoral and technical departments within institutions (Razavi and Miller, 1995b).

Mainstreaming has been heavily promoted within international development circles by gender policy advocates in a relatively small group of bilateral agencies, sometimes leading to accusations of a donor-driven agenda. It has also been argued that the mainstreaming agenda focuses on process and means rather than ends, leading to a preoccupation with the minutiae of procedures at all levels, rather than clarity or direction about goals (Razavi and Miller, 1995b). Feminist (or radical and Marxist) critiques of bureaucracies and their potential for promoting women's interests – or indeed those of any other disempowered social group – are not new, although they have only relatively recently filtered into the GAD field (Staudt, 1990; Razavi and Miller, 1995b; Goetz, 1995). Echoing these critiques, disquiet about the mainstreaming agenda and the way in which the GAD discourse is evolving was in evidence at the NGO Forum of the Beijing Conference, from both the left and the right.

The Platform for Action of the official conference in Beijing had comprehensively adopted the language of gender and, specifically, of gender mainstreaming. In the final chapter on institutional arrangements, a commitment was made to 'promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective . . . in the monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programmes' (United Nations, 1995a: 134). The preoccupation with institutionalization was also evident in the number of workshops at the NGO Forum (and panels at the official conference in Beijing) which focused on the issue from a variety of perspectives.

One of these, early on in the Forum, was entitled 'Feminism: from movement to establishment', convened by the Applied Socio-economic Research (ASR) organization of Pakistan. Nighat Khan, Director of ASR and a panellist at this workshop, argued that gender analysis had become a technocratic discourse, in spite of its roots in socialist feminism, dominated by researchers, policy-makers and consultants, which no longer addressed

issues of power central to women's subordination. She identified factors underlying this shift as the professionalization and 'NGOization' of the women's movement and the consequent lack of accountability of 'gender experts' to a grassroots constituency. A more radical perspective on the Beijing process and associated discourse on gender came from the Revolutionary Women of the Philippines, whose pamphlet 'The Gender Trap: an imperialist scheme for co-opting the world's women', attacked gender mainstreaming as a scheme to buy off once committed activists (Makibaka 1995: 5).

Nighat Khan asserted that the focus on gender, rather than women, had become counter-productive in that it had allowed the discussion to shift from a focus on women, to women and men and, finally, back to men. This latter point was echoed by others at the NGO Forum. Eugene Barriteau, presenting on a panel for Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era (DAWN), described how in Jamaica the shift in discourse from women to gender had resulted, in policy circles, in a focus away from women, to 'men at risk,' reflecting concern about men's failure in education and in securing employment, while women perform much better educationally and many support families alone.

This view is also reflected in other accounts. A Bangladeshi development worker is quoted by Kabeer as saying: 'Do you think we are ready for gender in development in Bangladesh when we have not yet addressed the problems of women in development?' It transpired that 'the new vocabulary of gender was being used in her organization to deny the very existence of women specific disadvantage and hence the need for specific measures which might address this disadvantage' (Kabeer, 1994: xii). According to Razavi and Miller, in their recent review of conceptual shifts in the women and development discourse:

> Although the gender discourse has filtered through to policy making institutions, in the process actors have re-interpreted the concept of gender to suit their institutional needs. In some instances, 'gender' has been used to side-step a focus on 'women' and on the radical policy implications of overcoming their disprivilege.
>
> (Razavi and Miller, 1995a: 41)

Mainstreaming in research: from subordination to disaggregation

The contradictions generated by mainstreaming resonate closer to home. As gender has become a more mainstream and therefore more respectable and fundable field of research, new players are entering the field, who bear no allegiance to feminist research and may not even be familiar with its

basic texts, concepts and methodologies. Economists, statisticians and econometricians (many, though not all of them, men), responding to the growth in demand from major development bureaucracies for research and analysis to inform their new 'gender-aware' policy directions, have taken up research into gender issues. This recent body of research has tended to look at gender as an interesting statistical variable, although certainly not a defining or universally relevant one (e.g. Appleton *et al.*, 1990; Haddad, 1991). Elson (1995) refers to this as 'the gender-disaggregation approach'. Drawing heavily on the neoclassical economic paradigm, it tends to a static and reductionist definition of gender (as woman/man) – stripping away consideration of the relational aspects of gender, of power and ideology and of how patterns of subordination are reproduced. To the extent that such approaches do consider the factors underlying gender disadvantage or inequality, they tend to look to information problems (e.g. women's tendency to follow female role models) or to 'culture' (defined as outside the purview of mainstream economics) as explanatory factors (see Lockwood, 1992 on Collier, for example). While such research may be of great interest and can provide invaluable insights and empirical evidence, it can under-specify the power relations maintaining gender inequalities, and in the process de-links the investigation of gender issues from a feminist transformatory project.

Bureaucratic requirements for information tend to strip away the political content of information on women's interests and reduce it to a set of needs or gaps, amenable to administrative decisions about the allocation of resources. This distillation of information about women's experiences is unable to accommodate or validate issues of gender and power. Women are separated out as the central problem and isolated from the context of social and gender relations. Furthermore, bureaucracies tend to privilege certain kinds of information perceived as relevant to dominant development paradigms and attribute significance to information in proportion to the perceived social and political status of the informer. Thus the information provided by western feminists has tended to get a better hearing than the perspectives of southern women (Goetz, 1994). It now appears that the quantitative expertise of male economists on gender is gaining increasing weight as the discourse becomes more technocratic, with the danger that in-depth, qualitative, feminist research may be devalued.

The Beijing Conference itself saw the production of several compendia of gender-disaggregated data, including a new edition of *The World's Women* produced by the UN Statistical Office (United Nations, 1995b) and UNDP's 1995 *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 1995). The latter featured two new indices – the Gender Disparity Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The GEM is an interesting departure in

that it attempts to establish a universal index by which 'empowerment' (a highly culturally loaded concept) can be measured and compared between countries, based on a composite of measures of income, participation in professional and managerial jobs, and formal political participation.[2] It is especially ironic that the rhetoric of grassroots, collective, bottom-up development ('empowerment') is invoked to name a top-down and universalizing statistic.

This is not to say that quantitative data or analysis of gender issues are not valuable. One key victory at Beijing was the successful campaign for the Platform of Action to include a commitment to the valuation of women's unpaid labour in satellite national accounts, making concrete a long-standing feminist rallying cry. In this case, an organized feminist campaign was able to exploit the increasing sophistication of gender-disaggregated statistics and of statistical method in general.

Advocacy and accuracy: lies, damned lies and gender statistics

As feminist researchers we felt it important in the build-up to Beijing to forge alliances with activists and campaigners within NGOs and women's organizations who are attempting to change the policies of public institutions. This proved challenging in a number of ways. Specifically, it highlighted our distance from the language used in the lobbying process, in both its conceptual underpinnings and style: our proclivity for academic rigour, complexity and critique seemed at times to be in direct opposition to the demands of consensus building, political utility and direct campaigning messages.

A couple of examples illustrate the point. We are all familiar with the claim that 'Women [account] for two-thirds of all working hours, receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one percent of world property' (United Nations, 1980, cited in Duley and Edwards, 1986: 48). It has recently come to light that the figure was made up by someone working in the UN because it seemed to her to represent the scale of gender-based inequality at the time.[3] It has been taken up since and repeated endlessly, to the point of becoming a cliché, as a justification for attention to gender inequality in access to resources. The point is that, whilst highly effective as an advocacy slogan (still in circulation fifteen years on!), the claim had no basis in reality and thus had the potential to backfire and discredit feminist research. In the context of 'mainstreaming', such slogans may have little credibility.[4]

Nevertheless, similarly dubious statistical claims continue to be made by activists and gender advocates in order to justify attention to women. DAWN's position paper for the Beijing Conference asserts that 'Women

world-wide produce half of the world's food, constitute 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor and own only 1 percent of the world's land' (DAWN, 1995: 6). Throughout the conference, the 'feminization of poverty' featured prominently as a topic of discussion and as a justification for channelling resources to poor women. The Platform of Action features a chapter on the 'persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women' which specifically refers to the 'feminization of poverty', and identifies female-headed households as a particularly vulnerable group in this context (United Nations, 1995a: 21).

At the conference, we distributed a briefing paper on gender and poverty reduction strategies, which, drawing on recent work in the GAD field (Jackson, 1996), questioned the growing orthodoxy of the feminization of poverty and, specifically, the claim that rising female headship is responsible for this.[5] But other critics of the 'feminization of poverty' at Beijing tended to be those on the religious right who viewed the association with female headship and the resulting demands for resources to be channelled to lone women as a threat to family values. Thus, we found ourselves going against the tide of the advocacy effort in rather unwholesome company.

Instrumentalism and opportunism

Activists, lobbyists and gender policy advocates working within institutions have adopted a variety of strategies to influence institutional agendas and bring about 'mainstreaming', often resorting to instrumental arguments to convince hardened bureaucrats of the need to address gender issues. Common instrumental arguments used are the need to invest in female education to serve population control and child welfare goals, or the importance of women's participation in community organizations to improve service provision and assist anti-poverty efforts. Such arguments appear justified to get gender issues on the table in organizations whose mandate and goals do not embrace social justice or equity. The World Bank's recent policy document for Beijing, for example, makes the case for gender almost entirely on efficiency grounds, constructing a convergence between the interests of women and the promotion of economic liberalization: 'Sound economic policies and well functioning markets are essential for growth, employment and the creation of an environment in which the returns investing in women and girls can be fully realized' (World Bank, 1995: 5).

Instrumental arguments, while they may prove successful in raising gender issues, are problematic in that they often result in women or gender being simply a means to other ends. Further, they run the risk of being discredited.

Tenuous evidence on the relationships between female education and fertility decline, or female education and productivity, can be easily challenged, weakening the justification for addressing gender issues, with a danger that resources will be withdrawn. Finally, the use of instrumental arguments fails to recognize the gendered nature of institutions themselves: information or the right arguments will not in themselves produce change. Institutional structures, rules and cultures, including the ways in which information is collected, processed and prioritized, reflect dominant gender interests, so that the pursuit of gender equity must include demands for organizational change.

Mainstreaming: the depoliticization of gender?

The ambivalence about – or even hostility towards – the GAD discourse expressed by some southern women activists at Beijing perhaps reflects deeper anxieties about the imposition of what is perceived as an external agenda and about whose interests are served by the mainstreaming project. This is underlined by the lack of accountability of northern development agencies to the southern women in whose interests they claim to be acting. While northern feminist groups can lobby their governments, albeit to limited effect, the responses of southern women to policy decisions taken in Washington or London do not even form part of the 'feedback loop' characteristic of pluralist politics (Jacquette and Staudt, 1988).

The variety of ways in which 'gender' has come to be institutionalized and operationalized in the development arena presents a contradictory and ironic picture. There is a disjuncture between the feminist intent behind the term and the ways in which it is employed such as to minimize the political and contested character of relations between women and men. A problem with the concept of 'gender' is that it can be used in a very descriptive way and the question of power easily removed. In order to bring the power back into gender, feminists need to move away from the idea of simple oppression and bring a gender critique into new theorizing about power (Oldersma and Davis, 1991). More practically, we also need to challenge the privileging of certain kinds of information on women and as a consequence particular kinds of expertise within development bureaucracies.

It is ironic that a concept which was engineered to carry a political message can be so depoliticized in its use as to be rejected by some of the people most committed to gender-redistributive change, such as feminist development activists. This speaks not to a need to reject the concept of 'gender', but rather to the need for much greater, and perhaps much more pragmatic and applied, dialogue between researchers and practitioners, to ensure that

concepts developed for activist arenas are not developed in the isolation of theory. Theorists can never, of course, control what happens to concepts when they are taken up by activists, nor would that be desirable. But given that much of feminist academic research grounds its legitimacy on a claim to relevance to the struggles of contemporary women, the ways in which feminist concepts can be distorted, even by well-meaning newcomers and potential allies, deserves careful monitoring.

The second half of this article now turns to a virulent challenge to the concept of 'gender' which came from a very different direction in Beijing: conservative backlash politics. While the first set of challenges related to concerns about the depoliticization of gender relations, this contrasting challenge, ironically, related to a view that ideas behind the concept of 'gender' tend to over-politicize the relations between women and men. This backlash challenge demonized 'gender' as a code for the disruption of cherished certainties about human relations.

The bracketing of gender in the Platform for Action

'We have to try to neutralize the tremendous amount of gender, gender perspectives, which are going to go directly against our families and against our children.' Speaker on a panel of conservative women at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, fringe meeting, September 1995.

The Platform for Action agreed in September 1995 at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a more highly contested text than any of the other international statements agreed at recent international conferences – at one point two paragraphs of text alone had generated thirty-one pages of amendments. Unlike any of these other agreements, debate over the Platform for Action was unique in calling into question the conceptual foundation and subject matter of the conference itself – the concept of gender, and with it, notions of the injustice, and mutability of gender relations. Was the conference to be about 'sex' or 'gender'? At the final preparatory committee meeting in March 1995 in New York, divergent views on this question emerged as country delegations had their last opportunity to signal their reservations over parts of the text prior to the Beijing meeting. Most dramatically, the representative from Honduras, backed by representatives from other Catholic countries, proposed the bracketing of the word 'gender' throughout the text. A working group eventually resolved on an acceptably broad definition of the term, but the tremendous anxieties over the meaning and implications of the 'gender perspective' illuminate an unexpected politicization of the concept of 'gender', which expressed, in part, aspects of backlash reactions to contemporary feminism. The debates over the word gender also shine light on some

contradictions and inconsistencies in feminist theoretical and political distinctions between sex and gender.

It may be that the conservative opposition to the concept expressed a second-wind reaction after the failure to prevent agreement at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 on a broad definition of women's reproductive health rights. Other factors explaining the conservative fixation on gender may include the perceived greater influence and presence of feminist NGOs, the greater visibility of lesbians in NGOs, and the inclusion, for the first time in the UN conferences on women, of very open language on sexual and reproductive rights.

The issue of the perceived influence of feminist NGOs became a particularly important target for conservative concern. The UN conferences on women over the last twenty years have set in place mechanisms for collaboration between feminist non-governmental groups and multilaterals which are of a much more sophisticated nature than is conventional in these fora. In part, the growing importance of these NGOs in the UN conferences on women is a reflection of their relative weakness at the national level; international fora have become arenas where they can 'leap frog' past the boundaries of state sovereignty to propose visions of women's liberation which national governments might not countenance – and for which there is often insufficient domestic support, even from among women. As a consequence, there is a high degree of discursive familiarity between NGOs and multilaterals such as the UN on issues such as women's rights, or the meaning of 'gender', sometimes leaving individual states in the dark. This appears to have fanned conservative suspicions of a conspiracy by a minority of unrepresentative women in these NGOs to undermine national sovereignty and cultural self-determination.

The trouble with gender

The conservative challenge to the use of the concept of 'gender' raises issues central to feminist epistemology and politics. How is the body constituted in gendered identity formation? What is the relation between gender identities and political subjectivities? Does sensitivity to gender reveal a concern for equality or for a celebration of difference? Does a concern with equity risk assimilating women to the masculine mean? Would a celebration of difference play into the hands of a tradition which has used notions of 'biology as destiny' to explain and justify inequality? The trouble with gender is that it allows for considerable variation in the ways in which feminists interpret identity formation and the relationship between anatomy and culture. This variation has been seen as part of the

richness and flexibility of feminism, but it has also meant the production of ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictions which conservative groups exposed in attacks on feminism. On the one hand, the lingering essentialism or 'biological foundationalism' (Nicholson, 1994: 82) in feminist thought encourages romanticism about women's shared experiences and interests, and supports policy solutions which assume a relationship between female embodiment and representation of women's interests – such as the assumption that more women in decision-making will result in feminist decisions. This is incompatible with, on the other hand, the postmodern exposure of 'women' as a product of a masculine dominative logic, and the degendering of ontology, which so fundamentally denies a determinate meaning to both 'woman' and 'women', that it hardly makes sense to have a conference on 'women' at all.

Problems of universalism, essentialism, relativism and nihilism are not new to critical feminist theory or feminist practice. What is argued here is that the conservative reaction to 'gender' highlighted inconsistencies and areas of neglect in contemporary feminist approaches to the constitution of gender identity and political subjectivity, and that these are problems which stand in particularly stark relief in an internationalist context like the Beijing Conference, which puts feminist claims to represent the meaning of women's experiences in all their heterogeneity to their starkest test. To develop this argument, a conservative polemic attacking feminist conceptions of gender which was circulated at the NGO Forum is analysed here, with a particular focus on its implications for feminist conceptions of the sex/gender relationship, and for conceptions of desire, motherhood, relationships to men and the equality/difference tension.

'Gender: The Deconstruction of Women'

'Gender: the deconstruction of women' is a 29-page essay by Dale O'Leary which was widely circulated at the NGO Forum. O'Leary is a writer for the US conservative Catholic publication *Hearth – Journal of the Authentic Catholic Woman*. It is not assumed here that her paper is representative of all conservative views or of fundamentalist religious perspectives in general. The paper does deserve some attention, however, in that of all the conservative documents available at the NGO Forum, it is the only one we are aware of which engages directly with feminist theory, and thus directly outlines some ways in which conservatives are politicizing gender in reaction to feminism. The paper will not be analysed in terms of what it shows of a conservative position, but rather in terms of the issues it raises for the coherence of feminist approaches to gender.

To emphasize the problem of gender, although at the cost of any subtlety, O'Leary lumps together virtually all feminisms under the general title 'Gender feminism'. The agenda of 'gender feminists' is presented through a translation of their 'code words' in the Platform for Action (this heightens the sense of conspiracy): 'free choice in reproduction' is explained as a code for abortion on demand; 'lifestyle' a code for homosexuality (O'Leary, 1995: 19).

The argument of O'Leary's paper runs as follows. If gender is defined as the social construction of roles and relationships between women and men, sexuality can be fluid, the centrality of the family can be challenged, role assignments such as motherhood and male breadwinner are revealed as social constructs, and indeed the fixity or irreducibility of anatomical sex itself can be questioned. All this, of course, has always been central to a feminist logic, though there has been less certainty about the last point, as will be suggested shortly. O'Leary's reaction to the feminist argument on social construction is to point out that there is no scientific proof for any of it, nor is there evidence that women do not freely choose traditional roles. On the contrary, science shows that sexed behavioural characteristics and social choices are programmed genetically,[6] and surveys of women show that they do freely choose their roles and are not victims of 'false consciousness', and that even if they want equal opportunities, they do not necessarily desire a sex/gender revolution – they value their womanliness.

These views might be considered fairly typical of conservative reactions to feminism. The key reason for the panic in relation to the term gender, however, appears to be its implications for sexuality and reproduction, reflecting two major conservative bogeys – homosexuality and abortion. Interestingly, conservative positions on the naturalness of restricting women to mothering roles, or to secondary economic positions, and so on, are not particularly stressed in O'Leary's document, nor, by and large, in other conservative pamphlets available at the Forum. This perhaps reflects changes in the economic roles of women in conservative countries worldwide. Poverty and male unemployment globally have pushed more women into work and enhanced their role in supporting families, and few conservatives would suggest that women withdraw from work in the context of poverty (though they might defend men's privileged access to favoured labour market positions). Nor is any disapprobation expressed for women in public decision-making roles, and indeed, many conservative delegations, including the one from the Vatican, were led by women. This may reflect pressure from conservative women for more participation in decision-making, and a secular increase in women's education levels and participation in government in many developing countries.

Declaring war on women's natures?

Although the predominant concern with sexuality and reproduction reflects perennial conservative anxieties, it is also a direct reflection upon the implications of the gender argument for the way we think of the body. Implicit in O'Leary's document is an understanding that, taken to its logical extreme, the argument about social construction must eventually deconstruct the body. As Linda Nicholson points out, this understanding of the implications of gender thinking has come unevenly to feminists. She shows that there have been two trends in the ways that feminists currently think of gender. First, there is the more familiar use of the term to stress the social construct in contrast to the biological given. Second, gender is increasingly used to refer to any social construction having to do with the male/female, as opposed to the masculine/feminine distinction (1994: 79). Nicholson quotes Scott to show how sex is subsumable under gender:

> gender is the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences. . . . We cannot see differences except as a function of our knowledge about the body, and that knowledge is not 'pure', cannot be isolated from its implication in a broad range of discursive contexts.
>
> (Scott, 1988: 2)

Nicholson argues that the problem with the first definition is that it is self-contradictory and risks biological essentialism, because biological sex has to be invoked at the very moment that the influence of the biological is being challenged – in other words, 'woman' remains a given upon which characteristics are imposed through social reactions to the body (1994: 80–1). This first understanding of gender has grounded feminist cross-cultural work on women's status in the sense that sufficient physiological givens are assumed to be shared by all women to generate a common range of social constructions. The changeability of these social reactions across culture, the important exceptions, rescues this approach from complete biological essentialism, in stressing the mutability of sex identities. The cost of this approach has been a central dilemma and political schism within feminism, stemming from the underplaying of differences between women, across culture and race in particular, in the interests of maintaining a notion of universality in the cross-cultural feminine, a universality, moreover, which disguised its roots in the experiences of white western women (Persram, 1994; Mohanty, 1991).

O'Leary's discussion of this first understanding of sex and gender illuminates familiar problems which it poses for the ways we think about equality and difference. The notion of social construction can be interpreted as suggesting a fundamental equality and sameness between the sexes, and O'Leary touches on a problem with this. Bringing up the liberal feminist

concern to see parity for women and men in all forms of employment, she argues that this will inevitably force women to conform to the male standard. She explains this, however, rather differently from feminists who point to structural pressures on women to become sociological males when they cross the public/private divide. Instead, she argues, the problem inheres in men's incapacity to become biological females:

> Trying to pretend that all the obvious differences are socially constructed and can therefore be changed, or that men and women can and should be the same, makes maleness the standard for women, because while women can enter the world of work, men cannot give birth.
>
> (O'Leary, 1995: 14)

This ignores, of course, the wide range of reproductive activities which men are perfectly capable of performing, but it does touch on a widely shared disappointment among women about the difficulty in winning social value for women's work, rather than struggling for success in the public sphere, only to be found wanting by a male standard. O'Leary links this problem with the drive for equality with the obsession with generating gender-disaggregated statistics on women's representation of women in all public forms of employment or politics. Although she does not intend the point in this way, she is identifying a problem with the unreflective pursuit of formal equity. Not all statistical differences reflect discrimination. Nor does fifty–fifty statistical equality reflect genuine equality and a cultural change to value women's interests – male/female equity in enrolment levels, for instance, tells us little about gender bias in the curriculum.

The second account of gender, in which 'sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along' (Butler, 1990: 8), is so sensitive to problems of essentialism that it rejects any account of sexual difference which invokes what is unique in female sexuality because this would re-cement the boundaries of gender identities. All associations with the term 'woman' are exposed as arbitrary meanings, and biology, rather than being something which women in all countries share, is instead a culturally specific set of ideas with little translatability across cultures. Now, the extreme postmodern unravelling of both 'woman' and 'women' is disconcerting enough to many feminists, whether academics or activists – it has often been pointed out that it may lead to a nihilistic conception of women (Persram, 1994: 287). As Nicholson observes: 'If those who call themselves feminists cannot even decide upon who women are, how can political demands be enacted in the name of women?' (1994: 102). To those espousing a conservative interpretation of women's roles[7] this is not the issue, as they have never made the politically motivated assumption that women are socially constructed. Instead, the anxiety is over the challenge to the notion that 'biology is reality' (O'Leary, 1995: 14).

This second approach to understanding gender appears to have been identified more clearly by conservative groups than it has been, perhaps, by feminist activists – for instance, in the gender and development field it does not appear to have much currency. One strategy to bring out the implications of these notions of the fluidity of the body in an alarmist and trivializing way prior to the Beijing Conference was the mock horror expressed by conservatives in the US over a scientific paper about genital abnormalities. Anne Fausto Sterling's discussion, 'The five sexes: why male and female are not enough' (1993), showed that genital abnormalities produce 'herms' (hermaphrodites), 'ferms' (female hermaphrodites) and 'merms' (male pseudo hermaphrodites). Conservatives used this as a springboard for insisting on clarifying the status of 'sex' in the Platform for Action, demanding 'assurance that only two sexes would be recognised' (O'Leary, 1995: 6).

While these kinds of reaction and strategy can be, and often are, dismissed by feminists as distracting irritations, it is worth noting that feminists have not been consistent in the way that notions of sex and gender, of biology and culture, ground their tactics. There is a tendency to use social constructivist arguments when convenient, and biologically essentialist ones at other times. At the Beijing Conference there were examples of policy arguments made on the basis of either sex or gender. Some lesbians invoked both in contradictory ways – for instance, it was widely maintained that the brackets around 'gender' in the Platform for Action directly signified homophobia, in that they expressed an attack on the notion of fluidity in the construction of the sexed body and of desire. Yet at the same time, a lesbian was reported as announcing, at one of the human rights tribunals, that she had been 'born a lesbian', insisting on a biologically grounded notion of her identity.[8]

The straw man of patriarchy – and other feminist universals

'Everyone has a right to be listened (to), . . . and atheists and lesbians do not have the right to impose their views on the rest of us'. Speaker from the floor at a meeting of conservative women at the Beijing Conference.

O'Leary presents a crude version of feminism which bears little resemblance to the complexity of feminist thought. It is hard to imagine feminists today who would accuse happy mothers of suffering from false consciousness or dismiss women's subjective interpretations of meaning in their lives. However, her interpretation of feminism is probably not so different at a general level from popular understandings of feminism, and as such it points to certain 'sore points' – or neglected issues – within feminism which have alienated women and men, perhaps more than necessary.

Not all feminists are 'atheists and lesbians', but if this is the popular perception of feminism, this suggests that feminists have under-theorized, or been dismissive of, a range of important aspects of women's lives. These include the role of women in many parts of the world in maintaining tradition, and the centrality of religion to their lives; women's joy in mothering and nurturing; and women's individual choices to make 'bargains with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988). Another neglected area is the great range of masculinities. This list may seem a reactionary set of concerns to some. Others may argue, and rightly, that feminists do deal with each of these areas, with masculinity perhaps more neglected than other areas because of the political imperative of addressing women's concerns first. Although feminists do deal with religion, motherhood, and so on, their analytical proclivities have been oriented primarily to critiquing not the subjective experience of motherhood or of worship or of partnership with men, but rather the conditions which are felt to strip freedom from women's choices in these situations – feminists critique the conditions of motherhood, not the value of parenting; they critique the gendered constraints of religion, not the value of spirituality. These subtleties are lost, however, on most people, and unfortunately the negative language which is sometimes used – such as speaking of women's 'burden' of child care, or of the 'reproductive tax' (Palmer, 1991) – does not convince people that positive value in women's choices and identities is being recognized. Nowhere is this more so than in popular perceptions of the way that feminists think about men and their relationship with women.

O'Leary brings this out rather wittily, charging feminists with creating a 'straw man of patriarchy': 'the proto-typical male chauvinist, patriarchal sexist oppressor who believes biology is destiny and wants women confined to the house, barefoot and pregnant, inferior, subordinate, second-class citizen'. She points out that if this person actually existed he would 'probably be confined to a maximum security facility as a sociopath' (O'Leary, 1995: 17). Feminists have always had trouble theorizing patriarchy with enough subtlety to embrace historical and cultural variation (Nicholson, 1994: 91–2), let alone individual male subjectivities. Although they have not been quite as crude as O'Leary suggests, there is room for much more work in understanding masculinity and male domination. More critical, perhaps, is the need to move beyond the sharply dualistic confrontational categories in which western feminists have tended to place the relations between the sexes. Feminists from the south have pointed out that this male/female opposition may be more central to the constitution of the gender identity of white middle-class western women than of women elsewhere (Minh-ha, 1987: 18). Postmodern feminists have pointed out that the very sharpness of this male/female dualism informing the concept of 'woman' actually undermines any meaning that 'woman' might have.

Crowded 'with the overdeterminations of male supremacy, invoking in every formulation the limit, contrasting Other, or mediated self-reflection of a culture built on the control of females' (Alcoff, 1988: 504), 'woman' is emptied of any meaning of its own and is less useful for feminist politics. Feminists have argued for the need for a more plural interpretation of 'woman' which refuses to 'brace woman's mobility against the fixity of a petrified man' (Berg, 1982, in Persram, 1994: 286). Just as important, however, are more plural interpretations of 'man' are also needed.

In the name of women

Given that feminists are indeed, as conservatives charge, a minority of women, and given that they are not in a position to legitimize their claims to represent the concerns of most women on the basis of democratic processes in social and political institutions which produce feminist representation, challenges to the relevance of feminist claims to women must be taken seriously. What is at stake is very clear in O'Leary's text – the relevance of feminism to women in developing countries:

> The success or failure of the Beijing conference depends on the delegates from developing countries. . . . one senses their frustration with the Gender Perspective. Most are pro-family, pro-religion, and basically pro-life. They know instinctively that Gender Perspective is not the perspective of women in their countries. On the other hand, they strongly support the advancement of women. . . . They are grateful for Gender Feminists' willingness to join with them in the battle against economic neo-colonialism. They do not want to appear to be opposing the equality of women.
>
> (O'Leary, 1995: 28)

As O'Leary implies, feminism has an edge in the developing country context because of its tendency to take a structural approach to problems of women's poverty and oppression.[9] But to return to the subject of this article, a broader concern for feminists working in coalition the world over relates to the place of gender in theorizing women's political subjectivity in cross-cultural contexts. Postmodernists argue that the only way to avoid generalizing from an essentialized western version of the feminine is to refuse to seek shared sex or gender characteristics, and to deny them political status. Cultural feminists propose instead a celebration of a multiplicity of feminine identities, but this can lead to a politically paralysed relativism (Persram, 1994; Goetz, 1991). The risk is that the reality of women's oppression can fall between the many stools of feminist anxieties over identity.

It seems possible to construct a feminist politics without insisting that the category of 'woman' or 'women' has a determinate meaning. The key, as

Mohanty suggests (1991), is to refuse to make an elision between 'women' as a socially constructed group, and 'women' as material subjects of their own history, in order that the material and ideological specificity of women's positions are appreciated, and generalization about gender relations is avoided. According to Nicholson, this also means refusing to assume sisterhood on the basis of gender or sex, but to seek instead to construct coalitions which acknowledge difference (1994: 103). The creation of coalitions between groups with very different interests certainly seemed to be taking place in Beijing, with, for example, a broad alliance on reproductive rights between north and south women, which allowed for rather different interpretations of these rights – abortions rights concerns predominating among northern women, and concerns for freedom from coerced abortions and contraception among southern women. Similarly, coalitions concerned with economic crisis were formed between southern women affected by structural adjustment, western women dealing with social service cuts, and women in transitional economies dealing with high unemployment (Agarwal, 1995). As Agarwal notes, this was the expression of the emergence of a 'strategic sisterhood' to replace the 'romantic sisterhood' of the past (ibid.).

At some level, however, the appeal to coalitional politics as a replacement for appreciating the relevance of sex or even gender to feminist politics is unsatisfactory. Why then organize together as women at all? It is hard to find space in contemporary feminist theory for the genuine sense of connection *as women* of which so many women spoke in Huairou and Beijing, yet it seems dishonest not to bear testimony to the palpable sense of commonality in spite of great differences. It seems important not to confuse discursive constructions of 'woman' with the living, talking, real person who engaged with other women in the Forum and the conference. If we still find meaning in shared biology only because the world continues to behave and treat women as though this is their primary defining characteristic, this does not erase its meaningfulness as a point of connection among women. Acting as women in the name of women we will inevitably infuse 'sex' with meaning, but attention to the various paths by which we each come to be 'sexed' should help to ensure that we avoid sinking back into reductive essentialisms. What seems critical, however, is that we are consistent in applying the politically motivated assumption that woman is a socially constructed category to feminist activism and policy work. This will protect us from the dead end of essentialism, the cultural brutality of universalism, and will also allow us to broaden our base of allies beyond the boundaries of 'sex'.

Conclusion

So, where does this leave us, departing from Huairou clutching somewhat battered gender concepts and wondering how to reclaim their feminist content without alienating potential allies, particularly among southern researchers and activists?

As northern feminist researchers in gender and development, one role we can play is to track the redefinition of concepts as discourses become institutionalized and help to identify opportunities for advancing feminist ideas within this process, being aware that we are often complicit in it. An example is the current debate in donor circles about good governance and participation, which provides considerable scope for questioning the nature of participation and indeed politics from a feminist perspective and, concretely, the opportunity to push for greater accountability of donor agencies and wider institutions to women and their organizations.

It is also important that we engage in dialogue with colleagues who work on gender issues from outside a feminist perspective, to attempt to broaden the scope of their studies and to see how their findings can inform our own work and campaigns. Training workshops in feminist research methods might be one vehicle for such a dialogue. We also need to ensure that the pioneering contribution of feminist theorists and researchers is recognized as gender and development work moves into the mainstream, and thus to convince funding agencies of the value of supporting non-quantitative, innovative and challenging research.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to look at whether and how GAD research serves those attempting to promote women's interests either in grassroots development work or through influencing policy. Some might claim that as academics it is not our business to determine how our research informs policy. At the very least, we need to maintain an open dialogue with feminist researchers and activists in the south, to listen to their critiques of current gender and development thinking, policy and practice, including our own, and to take on board their perspectives and priorities.

Notes

1 We were part of a team from several UK universities, comprising, apart from ourselves, Bridget Byrne, Lyla Mehta, Kirsty Milward and Sheelagh Stewart (IDS, University of Sussex); Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson of the University of East Anglia; Tina Wallace of the University of Birmingham and Inez Smyth,

formerly of the London School of Economics, now based at Oxfam. Tahera Yasmin Huque, who works for the Canadian International Development Agency in Bangladesh, was also involved in the UEA/IDS workshop, 'Breaking in; speaking out: making development organizations work for women' (Stewart, 1995).

2 This is not the place for a detailed critique of this index: suffice to say that numerous questions could be raised about the validity of the measures chosen as indicators of 'empowerment'.

3 The figure for the proportion of work done by women is variously reported at 60 per cent, 67 per cent (Maguire, 1984: 1, citing World Bank, 1980; UN, 1979) and 'nearly two-thirds' (United Nations, 1980).

4 A few weeks before the conference, a senior policy adviser in a bilateral agency rang the Institute of Development Studies to inquire whether there was any evidence to support the 'two-thirds' figure, since male colleagues had challenged her use of it. In a similar vein, a recent evaluation of the gender activities of the Canadian International Development Authority (CIDA) found that CIDA had not been able convincingly to back up its claim that failure to take on board gender will hinder the development process, such that this claim was now met with considerable scepticism (CIDA, 1993).

5 This questioning arises partly from the lack of conceptual clarity over what feminization means, partly from the limitations of empirical evidence, and partly from the implication that poor women should be the focus of our attention, rather than broader processes of gender discrimination.

6 Interestingly, in the months following the Beijing Conference, many UK newspapers carried stories reviving socio-biological arguments and presenting new scientific evidence for gendered genetic programming.

7 Or, as O'Leary puts it, women's 'vocations' (1995: 12).

8 We are grateful to Cecile Jackson for this example.

9 Of interest is the fact that O'Leary's text refuses structural explanations for a whole range of oppressions that women experience – like inner city poverty, domestic violence, lack of employment opportunities. However, she makes one exception, referring to women's poverty, lack of social rights and poor labour market options, when explaining why some women become prostitutes (1995: 23).

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